Fairbury Woman National Leader for Women's Rights

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The WCTU (Women's Christian Temperance Union) was founded in Ohio in 1873 and became the largest group advocating for women's rights in the United States. Margaret Cairns–Munns (1870-1957) was born in Fairbury, and she became the National Treasurer of the WTCU from 1915 until 1946.

The family story of Margaret Cairns – Munns began with the birth of her father, James H. Cairns, in Scotland in 1824. In 1848, he married Sarah Spence Ewart in Newcastle, England. James and Sarah were both 24 years old when they married. They eventually had nine children. When James Cairns got married, he worked as an engineer.

One year after they married, they emigrated to America. He initially worked as a Master Mechanic. In the 1850 Census, the couple lived in Hanover, New Jersey, and he was listed as a machinist. Their first child, Peter B. Cairns, was born that year.

By 1856, when James Cairns was 32, he switched from a Master Mechanic to a Baptist Minister. By the time of the 1860 Census, the family had moved to Hudson, Illinois. James gave his occupation as a Baptist minister. The children living with their parents included Peter, 10, Elizabeth, 6, George, 2, and John, one.

Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to Indiana. According to the 1878 Livingston County History Book, the Baptists in Fairbury began to raise funds to build a new church around 1861. This new church was built in 1865. It was a brick edifice measuring 38×50 feet and cost $3,000. The pastor in 1865 was Rev. James Cairns, and he dedicated the new church at its grand opening.

In the 1870 Census, the family lived in Indian Grove Township, and James Cairns's occupation was clergyman. The children living at home at the time of the census included Elizabeth, 16; George, 12; John, 10; James, 8; Mary, 4; and Lissa, 2. Shortly after the census was taken, daughter Margaret Agnes Cairns was born in Fairbury.

When Margaret Cairns was eight years of age, the family moved to Kansas. Son John William Cairn later recounted that when he was 18 years old, he helped to drive a covered wagon from Fairbury to Winfield, Kansas.

In the 1880 Census, the Cairns family lived in Winfield, Kansas. James Cairn's occupation was preaching. James was 56, and his wife Sarah was 57. The children living at home included John, 20, James, 18, Mary, 14, Lucy, 11, and Maggie (Margaret), age nine.

The family next moved from Kansas to the Seattle, Washington area. An 1884 Washington newspaper story reported that local services would include Rev. J. Cairns from Winfield, Kansas.

Another Washington newspaper story in 1884 reported that Mary Cairns, daughter of Rev. Cairns, had married John Pattison. Her husband became a lawyer and later served as the mayor of Colfax, Washington. John Pattison also ran for Governor, but lost that election.

Margaret Cairns was highly educated for the era in which she lived. She first attended Colfax College and then transferred to California College in Oakland, where she received a B.A. degree in the Class of 1891.

In 1892, Margaret Cairns went on a vacation to England. During her stay there, she witnessed the doings of the Britishers at the general election. Margaret told a reporter that she was more in love with the United States and its institutions than ever. The article reported that Miss Cairns would be teaching at the local public school when the school term started.

Margaret continued to teach and attend college. In 1894, she received an M.A. degree from the California College.

In 1895, during the Christmas break, the local school board requested that two teachers resign due to incompetence. One of these teachers was Margaret Cairns, the daughter of the well-known Rev. J. Cairns at the local Baptist Church. One teacher resigned, but Margaret refused to resign.

When Margaret returned to her classroom to start teaching after the holiday break, she found another teacher had been hired to take her place. Margaret sued the local school board, won her case, and the jury awarded her $250. That award would be equivalent to $9,575 in today's dollars.

Also in 1895, Margaret Cairns married lawyer Horace G. Munns. He was 37, and she was 25 when they married. They had one child, Harold G. Munns, born in 1897.

1898 was expected to be a happy year for the Rev. Cairns' family, as they were planning to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary by taking a vacation to Hawaii in November.

Unfortunately, Horace Munns died in February of consumption at the age of 39. Consumption, now called tuberculosis, had no cure in that era.

Margaret Cairns – Munns decided to accompany her parents on their voyage to Hawaii and to take her 18-month-old son with them. Unfortunately, the young boy fell very ill while at sea and died shortly after they landed in Hawaii. He was buried in Hawaii.

Margaret moved back in with her parents. In the 1900 Census, 29-year-old Margaret Munns reported that she was a widow. Her parents were both 76 years old. Local newspapers reported that Margaret had devoted her life to the temperance movement and began giving many speeches on the evils of alcohol. She became the Corresponding Secretary of the West Washington branch of the WCTU.

In August of 1908, the Fairbury Blade newspaper reported that Thomas A. Beach had received in the mail a copy of the Seattle Post newspaper about the 60th wedding anniversary of Rev. and Mrs. James Cairns of Seattle. Thomas A. Beach recounted that he knew the couple and that he was the pastor at the Fairbury Baptist Church in the 1860s.

Margaret Cairns–Munns served as the Corresponding Secretary of the West Washington WCTU from 1900 to 1915. She was also the managing editor of the *White Ribbon Bulletin*, the state Union's official paper.

In 1915, Margaret Munns moved to Evanston, Illinois, to serve as Treasurer of the National WCTU, a post she held for more than three decades until her retirement in 1946.

In 1925, Margaret was elected Treasurer of the World's WCTU at the 1925 convention in Edinburgh, Scotland, and continued in that global role until 1953, overseeing finances and traveling widely to promote temperance and women's citizenship.

Margaret retired as the Treasurer for the National WCTU in 1946. She retired as Treasurer of the World's WCTU in 1953. She moved back to Seattle and died there in 1957 at the age of 87. Because of her prominence in the WCTU, her obituary was printed in many different newspapers across the United States.

Today, according to Wikipedia, Margaret Cairns–Munns is remembered as an American pioneer schoolteacher in Washington State and a temperance reformer. She served as Treasurer of the National Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) (1915–46) and later, as Treasurer of the World's WCTU (1925–53).

Rev. James Cairns was the minister at the first Baptist Church built in Fairbury in 1865. His daughter, Margaret Cairns was born in Fairbury and she became a national leader in the temperance and women's suffrage movement.